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Copper Theft Environmental Impact
Talking Points
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Introduction:

- Copper cable theft is on the rise across Michigan, particularly in Detroit.

- Copper cable theft poses a serious health, public safety and environmental hazard to families in any community where this problem occurs.

The Problem:

- To get to the valuable copper wire inside the cable, thieves burn the insulation at so-called "burn sites" – which can be open pits or large steel drums, which may have their own residue.

- When thieves burn and strip cables to steal the copper, they release toxic chemicals that pollute the air, land and water.

- These toxic chemicals include dioxins, carbon monoxide, hexa-chlorobenzene and many others such as sulphur dioxide (SO_2), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), hydrogen chloride, heavy metals and ash. This has been documented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the United Nations Environment Program and the British and Canadian governments, to name a few.

- Released into the air, these pollutants can cause headaches, asthma, liver damage and cancer, according to the EPA.

- Without access to industrial-grade incinerators, copper thieves have to make do with more primitive techniques, using fuels like kerosene or diesel in a large empty oil drum or open pit.

- Incomplete incineration occurs with these primitive burning methods because of the low burning temperature (250 °C to 700 °C). This results in the generation of hydrocarbons and particulate matter, which make the pollution worse.

- Lead stabilizers, often included into the PVC polymer matrix of the plastic cable coating, are released during smoldering.

- Lead coated copper cables are also burnt, releasing additional lead – further polluting our air, water and land.

- The toxic byproducts of copper cable burning also end up in the land around the burn sites, where it can become runoff and pollute groundwater and soil.

- In 2006, the Saskatchewan Government's environmental spills unit issued the following public statement after cleaning up a burn site that had been abandoned:

  "People should be aware that burning insulation off copper wire in an open fire and handling the wire afterwards can lead to risks of coming in contact with pollutants that can have a direct effect on them – including lung irritation, cardiac problems or even an increased risk of cancer."

- Other countries recognize the seriousness of this problem and have taken steps to fight it, including passing laws that punish violators with lengthy prison terms and unprecedented fines up to $1 million dollars. **Michigan should do the same**.

Conclusion:

- The burning of copper cables using open pits or old oil drums is the most common method of stripping coated copper cables in areas where the cable has been stolen and is being readied for sale.

- This practice poses environmental and health-related problems.

- The burning or smoldering of cables releases toxic compounds and heavy metals into the air, ground and groundwater – creating mini toxic waste sites that will require expensive clean-up.

- Emissions from these burn sites pose a risk to people in the immediate area and downwind, especially those with cardiovascular and pulmonary problems like asthma or pneumonia.

- Health and environmental agencies around the world warn that the inhaling of these pollutants can also cause problems with kidney and liver functions.

- It is an unhealthy practice that puts others at risk and creates a financial burden on the city and property owners who may have to undertake clean-up efforts such as the removal of contaminated soil.

- Michigan already has a law making the selling of stolen copper illegal. I support the plan to make those who deal in scrap metals accountable for their transactions and ensure that they scrutinize and document where the metals came from and who is selling it to them.

- The objective is to reduce the incidence of burning of copper cables at great risk to our health and environment, just for the sake of a few quick bucks.